

Listening Actively

Listening is an essential ingredient in caring for others. Active listening is an art that takes others seriously, hears their feelings as well as the facts and responds in ways that communicate acceptance and encouragement.

History and Background

“If you would but listen to me!” is a plea as old as the Psalms (81:8). Humans hunger to be heard, to be taken seriously, to be accepted. Yet many have not accepted the discipline of listening. Instead we raise towers of Babel talking past each other.

Jesus was a good listener as well as a good teacher. He took time to listen to those whom others ignored: children and tax collectors, women and Samaritans. When he met the Samaritan woman at the well, he broke the rules of segregation and silence, staying to drink the water and listen to her story. He accepted what she had to offer and offered her his gift. When she went back and shared their conversation and his insights with other Samaritans in her town, they too believed in him “because of the woman’s testimony” (John 4:39). Zacchaeus was so happy that Jesus listened to him that Zacchaeus gave to the poor half of what he had collected (Luke 19:1-10). From the apostles to the pastoral counselors of today, leaders of the church have been active listeners. From the interrupting call on the Damascus road to a calm conversation in a pastor’s study, sensitive listening has marked the care, compassion and action of Christianity.

Common Practices

When people gain information and influence, they sometimes pass them on by lecturing, advising, analyzing, moralizing, warning, humoring or even sympathizing, often turning off the very people they are determined to help. The power of active listening gives people the opportunity and courage to tell their personal story, address its problems and take full responsibility for it. The person who listens can learn from the story and take deep satisfaction in seeing the other move and grow.

Skills and Attributes Needed

Listening takes concentration. If you want to work on your listening ability:

- Be open to listen at any time. There is no single time and place for it. It may be during Bible study or at the laundromat.
- Be alert to people in times of personal crisis, such as divorce, illness or death, and in times of celebration, such as marriage or achievement.
- Show that you’re listening and that you understand.
- Let the person know it’s safe to continue talking.
- Reflect the other person’s feelings by periodically clarifying and summarizing what you are hearing. If you are wrong the person will offer a correction. Such clarification can help your understanding, and help the speaker clarify their thoughts and move toward possible action or resolution.
- Try to become aware of unstated feelings behind the message. Does

there seem to be stress, frustration or a personality conflict?

- You need not necessarily speak. Silent attention and an occasional nod may be all that is needed.
- Face the other person squarely with an open, comfortable posture. Maintain eye contact.
- Listen with acceptance. Acceptance is not necessarily agreement. It does mean responding without judging or imposing your opinion.
- Avoid continual informational questions that tend to pull people away from their focus and their feelings.
- Focus on the speaker’s needs and not your own.
- Observe physical language: posture, position, movement, tension, facial expression, tone and volume of voice.
- Watch your own reactions. Be aware of your anxiety or the need to rescue, cure, succeed or save face.
- Listen with “free-floating attention”: openness to the full range of possible meanings and implications. Remain free from preconceived ideas about what you are hearing and the need to find a solution.
- Be patient and relaxed.
- Have compassion and empathy.

Ways to Increase Skills, Knowledge and Effectiveness

- Practice with a group of caring, concerned, open church members. You might begin with working in pairs. Let one person make a statement about how he or she feels. Let the other try to say back what was heard. Then practice

making statements and responses until the reflections are accurate most of the time.

- Practice listening with others in a group by acting out situations reflecting not only immediate personal and pastoral concerns, but also current problems facing the church and society.
- Include “listening practice” in the introduction to any small groups, committee orientation, or important discussion in your church.
- Gather a group of people who share a common concern and role-play a situation that all might face. Discuss what each heard during the role-play and what the players were trying to get across.
- Attend a workshop on listening or caregiving. .
- Use **Called to Care: A Notebook for Lay Caregivers**, published by the Parish Life and Leadership Ministry, which includes training on care-giving skills and active listening. Order from United Church of Christ Resources, telephone, toll-free, 800-537-3394.

Questions

- What is the difference between active listening and the way you normally listen?
- Is there anyone in particular to whom you need to practice listening? It may be a child, spouse, parent, co-worker, committee member, etc.
- What is easiest for you in active listening?
- What is one thing you need to practice?